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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 07 ASUNCION 000256

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NSC FOR JOSE CARDENAS; SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD

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SUBJECT: PARAGUAYAN PRIEST LUGO'S CONVERSION TO POLITICS A
WORK IN PROGRESS

Classified By: PolCouns James P. Merz; Reasons 1.4(b),(d)

¶1. (C) Catholic priest Fernando Lugo exploded onto the Paraguayan national political stage as a potential candidate for Paraguay's presidency in March 2006 as the keynote speaker at an anti-government demonstration. However, Lugo is hardly a novice to politics judging from his family's involvement in dissident politics during the Stroessner regime and his own involvement in demonstrations by peasants for land while a bishop to one of the poorest regions in Paraguay. Lugo strikes an easygoing, friendly, down-to-earth posture in small personal settings, stressing his commitment to fighting corruption and recounting his experiences on the campaign trail. However, his own personal history, as told by adversaries who claim to know him, offers evidence of noteworthy flaws in both his character and judgment. Lugo has proved open to meeting regularly with EmbOffs and expresses a commitment to good relations with the U.S. In his speeches, he has steered clear of rhetorical excesses embracing leftist ideology. But he has also offered few details of what a Lugo presidency would look like, except to say recently he favors Bachelet and Lula as models of governance over Morales and Chavez. Lugo's ability and disposition to forge compromise will be tested in the coming year as opposition parties' leaders have yet to coalesce around his candidacy, and he has shown increasing impatience with being beholden to opposition control. END SUMMARY.

Lugo on Paper

¶2. (U) Fernando Armindo Lugo Mendez was born in San Solano, Paraguay in the southeastern province of Itapua located some 50 miles north of Paraguay's border with Argentina on May 30, ¶1951. His father Guillermo Lugo Ramos and mother Maximina Mendez Fleita were both affiliated with the Colorado Party dissident movement; his father was arrested on several occasions and his mother was the sister of the prominent Colorado dissident Epifanio Mendez Fleitas. Lugo was born the youngest of five children. His oldest brother (living in Sweden at the time) and his mother both died last year. He has another brother who lives in France and a sister who lives in Encarnacion, Paraguay on the border with Argentina. A third brother, Pompeyo Lugo, participates actively in Lugo's campaign. Lugo maintains all of his brothers were expelled at some point by the Stroessner regime for alleged dissident activity. He was reportedly arrested himself in 1976 upon returning from a trip to Argentina where he visited

his uncle Epifanio Mendez Fleitas.

13. (U) Lugo graduated from high school in Encarnacion as an elementary school teacher in 1969. In 1970, he entered the seminary for the Society of the Divine Word (SDV), a congregation of the Catholic Church with a strong vocation to missionary work founded by a German priest in the late 1800s. He took his vows in 1975, obtained a degree in religious studies from Catholic University, and was ordained in 1977.

14. (U) After ordination, Lugo traveled to Ecuador where he worked as a missionary for five years until 1982 during a politically turbulent time there. In 1983, Lugo traveled to Rome to study, obtaining a degree in sociology with a minor in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. During his summer break from studies in Europe, he traveled and worked as an auto worker for 12 weeks in a German auto manufacturing company - where he remarked once to PolCouns - he earned more in one day than most Paraguayans earn in a month. He traveled once to Minnesota to attend a religious conference. He has traveled similarly to Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela for religious events. In 1992, he was named Provincial Superior of the Society of the Divine Word and in 1994 he was ordained a bishop. That same year, he took over the diocese of San Pedro, Paraguay's poorest province, until he resigned in January 2005. After spending some time doing parish work in Encarnacion, he assumed leadership of the Divine Word's parish and school in Asuncion for almost all of 2006. He resigned from the priesthood and announced his intention to run for President on December 25, 2006.

Lugo: More and Less Than What You See

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15. (C) Post first established contact with Fernando Lugo in June 2006 in a meeting at the home of his brother, Pompeyo Lugo, in Patino (a small town located some 30 kilometers outside of Asuncion). Pompeyo is married to an American citizen who is a principal of an English-speaking international school on the outskirts of Asuncion. That initial meeting was dominated by Pompeyo who has a very forceful, bordering on aggressive, personality. Pompeyo, whose wall in his study is adorned with large Paraguayan and U.S. flags, is reportedly a U.S. legal permanent resident. In the course of this meeting, Pompeyo took pains to convey to PolCouns his own personal allegiance to the U.S. Lugo had just emerged on the national political scene three months prior, with his speech at a March rally and it would be six months before Lugo would officially announce his candidacy. Nevertheless, Pompeyo spoke confidently of the priorities a Lugo administration would assume insisting he would not only take up the fight against corruption writ large, but also drug trafficking, money laundering, and even terrorist financing, particularly as relates to the Tri-Border Area (TBA) and the Muslim population there. The message came across as over the top, tailored as it was to U.S. interests. Fernando Lugo, by comparison was very guarded during this meeting, offering little insight into his personality or his political ambitions and allowing his brother to do all of the talking.

16. (C) In a series of subsequent meetings one on one with PolCouns over the ensuing 9 months, Fernando Lugo has come across as friendly and easygoing. He dresses casually in button-down, short-sleeved, cotton shirts and loose-fitting khaki pants; he invariably wears sandals. When he speaks, his tone is conversational and measured. He projects an image of calm and ease one associates with a religious official, though he has rarely invoked God or religion in his conversations with PolCouns except to speak to how the Constitution's prohibition against "ministers" becoming President could threaten his candidacy. He offers thoughtful, although not very original, comments on the challenges Paraguay faces particularly as regards the

judicial sector. He is not prone to speechifying as many from the political sector are even in small settings. Instead, he has regularly asked PolCouns for his opinion regarding controversial Paraguayan political players and about how the U.S. meets challenges in areas such as judicial administration. He conveys a desire to maintain good relations with the U.S. without speaking to what would define those relations.

17. (C) While Lugo projects an image of himself as a conciliator whose first instinct is to seek compromise over confrontation, others who know him say he can be inflexible on matters on which he feels strongly. In his public speeches and in his private conversations with PolCouns, he takes pains to avoid leftist rhetorical flourishes. He aims to appeal to as many and alienate as few as possible from both sides of the political spectrum. However, in seeking to cast a moderate image and avoid conflict and controversy in his conversations with PolCouns, he has proven himself evasive at best and disingenuous, bordering on deceitful at worst, on a number of issues -- some central and others inconsequential.

-- It is a fact that Lugo's brother Pompeyo studied in the former Soviet Union. However, in an early meeting, Fernando Lugo pointedly denied Pompeyo had ever studied there, presumably because he thought it might reflect poorly on himself. Only recently, he acknowledged that his brother studied in the Soviet Union then going so far as to suggest his brother had been detained temporarily by Soviet authorities who accused him of being a CIA spy. (NOTE: Several individuals have told PolCouns that they have heard Pompeyo describe himself as a CIA spy. These same individuals have called into question Pompeyo's mental stability. PolCouns found Pompeyo rather erratic in his one and only meeting with him last June. END NOTE)

-- It is a fact that the grass roots movement "Tekojoja" that emerged recently to support Lugo's candidacy includes several members from the radical leftist party Patria Libre. When questioned on this matter, Lugo said he was not aware of this. His response came off as disingenuous. According to

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one of his closest advisors, Rafael "Rambo" Saguier, a Liberal Party operative and brother of Senator "Tito" Saguier of the Liberal Party, Lugo created this movement and many of its members are long-standing friends. It is doubtful Lugo would not have known that members of Patria Libre had joined his group.

-- Lugo is rumored to have been associated with some of the individuals tied to the Cecilia Cubas kidnapping, with the prosecutor in the case suggesting Lugo had a phone call conversation with Osmar Martinez, the lead conspirator in the case. When questioned by PolCouns on his involvement, Lugo initially evaded the question instead of categorically denying his involvement. He remarked that he recently met someone on the campaign trail who on hearing so many attacks on Lugo's character had told Lugo he no longer cared whether the rumors were true or not. As Lugo's anecdote left the central question of his ties to the kidnapping unaddressed, PolCouns asked Lugo again whether he had been involved. Lugo denied his involvement. He said that he had received a phone call from Osmar Martinez whom he did not know at the time inviting him to a book showing. He also said that he had once taught a (now former) nun who later was convicted for her involvement in the kidnapping. (NOTE: On his own initiative, Lugo presented himself to the prosecutor on the Cubas kidnapping case to issue a formal statement denying involvement and said he considers the matter closed. Lugo has also alleged that this same prosecutor tried to bribe another priest into testifying against him but he (Lugo) declined to ever file a formal complaint. END NOTE)

A Wolf in Sheep's Clothes?

18. (C) In 1994, Lugo was ordained a Bishop and assigned to San Pedro, historically Paraguay's poorest department (i.e. the poorest of the poor), where he regularly engaged in political activities until his resignation in January 2005.

-- It is a matter of record that throughout his time in San Pedro, Lugo was regularly involved in mostly peaceful demonstrations by peasants for land and more technical assistance and services from the government. Nevertheless, when recently questioned about his involvement in the land demonstrations, Lugo evaded responding directly asking the journalist to provide proof.

-- Peasant demonstrations peaked in mid- to late-2004 with a series of well-organized road closures and land invasions. These demonstrations increased in number and frequency around the same time that Cecilia Cubas was kidnapped, with some of the major conspirators tied to Patria Libre and hailing from San Pedro. President Duarte brought the military out of the barracks in response to the increasing sense of insecurity in the countryside and within the capital. In November 2004, a major peasant demonstration proved a failure as rain contributed to a poor turnout. In January 2005, Lugo resigned as Bishop to San Pedro. Not a few adversaries of Lugo within the landholding community attribute the ensuing demise of the peasant protests as much to Lugo's disappearance from the region as to the military's emergence and the failed November demonstration. But that also speaks to his leadership abilities.

-- Oswaldo Varela, convicted for involvement in the 2001 kidnapping of Maria Bordon de Debernardi, reportedly stayed in Lugo's residence at some point when Lugo was living in San Pedro. In 2003, Lugo visited Patria Libre leaders Juan Arrom and Asuncion Marti who were implicated in the de Bordon de Debernardi kidnapping and live in Brazil where they were granted refugee status.

-- Separately, Colorado Deputy Carlos Maggi Rolon, who represents San Pedro and is a former supporter of imprisoned coup plotter Lino Oviedo, recently told PolCouns that Oviedo had paid Lugo several thousand dollars to organize a large peasant demonstration in 2000. Maggi maintained that the plan was for the march on Asuncion to produce violence, including perhaps the deaths of several peasants, that would ultimately lead to the overthrow of then-President Gonzalez Macchi. Oviedo presumably identified Lugo for his leadership role within the peasant community and the deal was supposedly

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struck on Church grounds. According to Maggi, Lugo not only did not keep his part of the bargain by failing to pull off the demonstration but he never returned the money he had received to organize the event. (COMMENT: It bears noting Maggi does not have a sterling reputation when it comes to integrity and by his own admission was implicated in a plot designed to overturn the government. Post has no way of assessing the veracity of his allegations but, broadly speaking, they do have an air of credibility. END COMMENT)

-- San Pedro cattle rancher Rafael Perrone told PolCouns that Lugo had associated with leaders of the campesino movement in San Pedro, including at least one notorious figure implicated in marijuana cultivation and trafficking. He maintained Lugo ran local prosecutor Arnaldo Giuzzio out of San Pedro upon learning Giuzzio sought to press charges against him for his involvement in land invasions. Perrone said that he personally had heard Lugo give rabble-rousing speeches condemning the FTAA and "yankee" imperialism and calling for land seizures.

-- Perrone recalled giving a ride, at Lugo's request in 2000, to an individual with a foreign accent. Afterwards, Perrone said Lugo reportedly confided to him that the

individual he had given a ride to was a member of the FARC and had been carrying a machine gun in his bag. According to Perrone, Lugo had said the FARC member was in Paraguay providing training and that he had sought to recruit Lugo. Perrone had the impression that Lugo had not requested the meeting and was nervous about having been approached by a member of the FARC.

-- Lugo resigned as bishop to San Pedro in January 2005 ostensibly for health reasons. However, his involvement at the time in leading peasant demonstrations some of which resulted in violence, was a subject of controversy. He is also rumored to have had several affairs, including with a former Liberal Senator Eva Recalde. According to Lugo's own advisor, "Rambo" Saguier, he is the godfather of a sixteen year old girl who may actually be his biological daughter. Apparently, there is some concern the girl's legal father knows this and may be coopted by Lugo's political adversaries to go public out of vengeance against Lugo, and his daughter with whom he is not on good terms. According to Santiago Witt, the Holy See's Deputy Chief of Mission, Lugo was pressured to resign as the Bishop in San Pedro and, if he had not gone willingly, he would have been removed publicly.

Monsenor Lugo Comes to Asuncion

¶9. (U) Lugo claims that when he resigned as bishop, he expected to go into peaceful retirement at the parish in his mother's community in Encarnacion. However, in early 2006, a number of opposition leaders, led by Pedro Fadul, the President of the Beloved Fatherland Party (PPQ), invited Fernando Lugo to participate in a March demonstration against the government. The Supreme Court had just taken a decision that opened the door to President Duarte's claiming the Colorado Party Presidency in apparent violation of the Paraguayan Constitution's prohibition against a President holding another position and the opposition was up in arms. Fadul, himself, hails originally from the business sector and his politics tend to right of center. A devout Catholic, Fadul, however, knew Lugo from when they both were much younger. He identified Lugo on his merits as someone of integrity and prominence from outside Paraguay's formal political party structure. PPQ, an urban-based party, organized the demonstration that surprised everybody by producing a turnout of some 40,000 protesters. Lugo assumed much responsibility for the success of this demonstration which effectively launched his emergence as a leading candidate for the Paraguayan presidency up for election in ¶2008.

Lugo is not Another Chavez But...

¶10. (C) Lugo has repeatedly tried to cast his message as devoid of ideological underpinnings. He stresses his commitment to three pillars: 1) reconciliation among parties, classes, and ethnic groups; 2) economic reactivation

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through an emphasis on equal opportunity; and 3) fighting corruption. He maintains Paraguay needs to find its own course. Privately, he has said that he finds fault with the Venezuelan model because of its predilection for seeking to fix problems by merely doling out money. He had greater regard for the Morales phenomenon in Bolivia, if for no other reason than that it relies more on a grassroots movement. He insists, however, Paraguay needs to find its own course based on its unique history. More recently, when pressed for a model of governance from the region, he publicly embraced Bachelet and Lula over Chavez and Morales. In a curious, if ecclesiastical, turn of phrase, Lugo said he prefers what he called "the responsible left" over "the Shiite left"

¶11. (C) In substance, however, Lugo has not defined in much detail what his administration would do nor what figures in

his campaign would assume key roles. The emphasis he places on fighting corruption cuts across all economic classes and political parties. He describes Paraguay's current judicial system as favoring the rich and powerful (COMMENT: It does. END COMMENT) and he says he is exploring ways to introduce reforms to render it more independent. On economic policy, he has said that he favors a mixed economy and rejects statism. Lamenting the deep poverty he observed on a daily basis as a bishop for 11 years to one of the poorest regions of Paraguay, he expressed skepticism about a model of export-driven growth for Paraguay's agriculture economy at the expense of expanded opportunities for the country's landless peasants. He has not however described how his vision of expanding opportunity for thousands of landless peasants would jibe with the exigencies of today's global economy. Several claim Lugo's philosophy is simple: all poor people are good and all rich people are bad. From that premise though, he has not the vaguest idea of what policies to embrace to effect change.

Supporters Hot and Cold

¶12. (U) Lugo's campaign enjoys strong support from two grassroots groups, the Social and Popular Bloc and Tekojoja. The former is made up of primarily union activists; the latter consists of an array of leftist political activists drawing broadly from the human rights, labor, peasant and indigenous communities. Tekojoja (which means "equality" in the indigenous language of Guarani) includes some members of the radical leftist party Patria Libre and individuals involved in dissident activities against the Stroessner regime. These groups have fully embraced Lugo's candidacy with the latter, Tekojoja, having collected over 100,000 signatures to support his nomination as president. Both groups, however, offer little in the way of the structure and resources that a traditional opposition party can provide.

¶13. (C) Meanwhile, Lugo continues to enjoy uneven support from the National Coalition, an amalgamation of some 42 opposition groups dominated by Paraguay's traditional political parties, that was established officially at the end of 2006 with the purpose of identifying one candidate for the opposition. While Lugo leads most opinion polls, at least three prominent politicians from within the Coalition -- Pedro Fadul, President of the Beloved Fatherland Party (PPQ), and Senator Carlos Mateo Balmelli and Governor of Central Department Federico Franco of the Liberal Party -- have their own presidential aspirations. So, too, does imprisoned coup-plotter Lino Oviedo, whose UNACE Party also belongs to the Coalition. To date, the parties have not been able to agree on a mechanism for selecting the sole candidate for the opposition. Lugo and his supporters would prefer leaders forge some kind of political agreement to support his candidacy. Mateo is insistent each party select its own candidate at year's end in internal elections before a face-off election to determine the candidate to run against the Colorados. Mateo and the others probably harbor the hope the Colorados will appeal to the Supreme Court to eliminate Lugo as a candidate on the basis of his being a "minister" -- notwithstanding his resignation last December -- which would clear the path for each to make his own run. Others within the Coalition, however, see in Lugo their best chance ever to end the Colorados sixty year hold on power; they believe they can control him if he wins on their coattails and the opposition political parties dominate the Congress.

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¶14. (C) A demonstration scheduled for March 29, ostensibly to repudiate abuses committed by the Duarte government and the Supreme Court, should serve a barometer of Lugo's support at this juncture. Both Citizen Resistance (the group that organized last year's demonstration) and the Social and Popular Bloc plan to participate. The National Coalition, however, driven by the Liberal and Beloved Fatherland

Parties, adopted a decision March 21 to support the demonstration "symbolically" but pointedly declined to call upon party members to participate. Both parties complained the upcoming demonstration had transformed into more a campaign event celebrating Lugo's candidacy than an opportunity for the opposition as a whole to demonstrate against the government. Other smaller parties, including UNACE and the socialist Country in Solidarity Party, have announced they will support the demonstration on their own. Last year's event drew upwards of 40,000. Lowering sights in the face of resistance from the opposition's two leading parties, Lugo has said he will be pleased with a turnout of five to ten thousand supporters.

Where's the Money

¶15. (C) Lugo said that an advertising agency recently told him he would need some \$27 million dollars to run an effective ad campaign to win the election. Lacking that kind of money, Lugo maintains he's running his campaign on a shoestring with small in-kind contributions from supporters around the country. As an example, he recounted how he had held a series of some 24 meetings in three days in the northeastern Department of Amambay, on Paraguay's border with Brazil, with several dozen to a hundred individuals generally in attendance at each event. A politician told him it would typically cost his party some \$3,000 to organize a similar series of events given the expenses involved with transporting folks in and feeding them. Lugo maintained he had only spent \$2 in toll booth fees with all of the remaining expenses picked up by supporters who volunteered their cars, trucks, and buses to bring in attendees, with another supporter providing free gas and the folks in attendance bringing their own food.

¶16. (C) When asked about money coming into his campaign from abroad, Lugo has been evasive. He first told DCM and PolChief that he continues to receive funds from friends and supporters in Germany. More recently, he told PolCouns that no offers are forthcoming as it is still early in the campaign and no one in the world even knows Lugo. In February, though, he announced that he had turned down an offer of 1 million dollars from a businessman in Ciudad del Este on grounds he didn't want to be compromised by someone linked to corrupt activities including money laundering and contraband. One prominent newspaper called upon Lugo to name the individual suggesting inventing such stories was a common ploy to build one's credentials for running a clean campaign.

Lugo advisor, "Rambo" Saguier, identified former Colorado operative Raul Meza as Lugo's treasurer. According to Saguier, Meza reports he has raised upwards of \$60,000 for the March 29 demonstration from private donors. Saguier, who harbors his own suspicions about Lugo's loyalties, did not believe Lugo was presently receiving money from abroad given the fact that Lugo apparently expresses concern regularly about how he is going to finance the campaign.

¶17. (C) Meanwhile, many rumors abound about outside money flowing to Lugo's campaign. Colorado Fernando Talaverna, a lawyer who scores low points for integrity (he presented PolCouns with a high-tech cellular phone as a "gift" at their second and last meeting; the gift was declined/rejected) maintained last year that a cultural attach for the Argentine Embassy had organized a dinner at which the Argentine reps offered to provide assistance to Lugo's campaign. He also said that the Bolivians had offered to provide funds. Others have suggested China could look to funnel money to Lugo counting on him to cut Paraguay's long standing policy in favor of Taiwan. Cattle rancher Perrone maintains Austrian citizen Jorge Bierbaumer, who works for the German assistance agency GTZ, funnels cash to Lugo.

(NOTE: According to Perrone, the Germans transferred Bierbaumer out of San Pedro but he is still providing funds

to Lugo. END NOTE) Paraguay's own Foreign Minister Ruben Ramirez told the Ambassador March 14 that Lugo is receiving funds from Venezuela but provided no proof. Separately, Senate President Enrique Gonzalez Quintana of UNACE told PolCouns that he knows for a fact, based on contacts with peasant leaders in Paraguay's interior, that Lugo is receiving money from foreign governments in the region. At the same time, Gonzalez continues to provide Lugo public support and has announced he plans to participate in and perhaps even give one of the major speeches at the March 29 demonstration. Lugo's campaign does not presently give off appearances of receiving large influxes of cash - but as Lugo said himself, it is still early.

Comment: Paraguay is not Venezuela But...

¶18. (C) Paraguay is not blessed with large deposits of oil but rather remains largely an agriculture-based economy. It's population is mostly rural. Democracy's roots are shallow; civil society, however increasing vibrant, is only just starting to feel its oats. Leftist groups, while vocal, are generally small. Peasant groups periodically flex their muscles but are usually cowed by the military. The military is apolitical and itself weak. Notwithstanding deep-seated poverty, Paraguay's population remains relatively conservative and distrustful. Paraguayans blame the country's backwardness on entrenched corruption as much as "neoliberalism." To the extent they hold the government and the political class -- not to mention democracy on a subliminal level -- responsible for the country's plight, Lugo, as someone who emerges from outside the political system, offers significant appeal.

¶19. (C) No doubt, tackling Paraguay's poverty is a priority for Lugo and we can expect him to be predisposed to adopt "leftist" policies. However, unlike Chavez, Lugo has said he wants -- and for the time being recognizes he needs -- to unite individuals from all sides of the political spectrum. He has signaled that he wants to maintain good relations with the U.S. and would even welcome an invitation to visit the U.S. Aware corruption is the one issue that crosses class lines, he makes a commitment to fight corruption and expand opportunity the center of every speech he gives. Ironically, however, Lugo is caught up in a love-hate relationship with the traditional political party establishment. He knows that his greatest strength lies in his not being owned by the political establishment. It is also increasingly evident, however, he is frustrated with the parties for not fully embracing him. Yet, he is not convinced he can win without the kind of organization, resources, and votes the traditional opposition parties can provide. And they haven't decided what they want to do with him.

¶20. (C) Lugo is eminently likable. He is easygoing and friendly. Few photos are taken of him without a generous smile on his face. He is running as much on his credentials for honesty and integrity as a priest for 30 years as anything. Ironically, however, his friendliness belies a tendency to play a little generously with the truth when he seeks to avoid delicate issues in private and in public. Lugo has not revealed many details about his agenda except for broad generalities. No doubt, he is trying to cast a net as wide as possible to attract supporters. Given his lack of experience in government, he also may just not have thought out a concrete plan. (Fujimori did not have one until he was in office - and shamelessly stole Vargas Llorca's) Or, he may be driven by a desire to effect "economic justice" that he would just as soon not share right now for fear of the political backlash. In all likelihood, all three apply.

CASON